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AUTHOR Mills, Brett D.
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ABSTRACT

Based on evidence obtained from Greek literature and artifacts, this paper examines the extent to which women in ancient Greece participated in physical activity, sports, and games. Homer's "Odyssey" describes women playing ball and driving chariots; vases dating back to 700-675 B.C. portray women driving light chariots in a procession; a girl juggling 12 hoops appears on an Attic cup dated around 475-450 B.C.; feminine acrobatic performance was portrayed in Xenophon's "Symposium"; aquatic activities were not only recreational but a necessity of everyday life--the earliest known evidence of women involved in swimming was found once again in Homer's "Odyssey"; the only known artifact depicting women in the act of swimming is a red figured vase, dated around 500 B.C.; accounts of women hunting are found in mythological Greek writings; there is some evidence for women being involved in horseback riding; wrestling for women was introduced by Lycurgus in the ninth century B.C.; and mythology and art indicate running was the most popular physical activity for women in ancient Greece. Although women were banned from participating in the Olympic games, they had their own running competitions at Olympia. (Contains 38 references.) (LL)

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Women of Ancient Greece: Participating in Sport?

Brett D. Mills
St. Andrews College
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The goal of this paper is to give a clear indication of the extent to which women were involved in sport and games in ancient Greece. When scholars first began investigating physical activity of ancient Greece they paid little attention to any evidence indicating women's involvement in physical activity. Many books on ancient Greek athletics talk briefly of women in physical activity, but little or no attention has been given to the enormous evidence indicating women's involvement in physical activity.

This examination of the available evidence indicating women's involvement in physical activity in ancient Greece will discuss women's involvement in physical activity in general, and will also discuss specific areas of physical activity: ball games, acrobatics, aquatic activities, hunting, equestrian sports, wrestling, and running.

The earliest account of women's involvement in physical activity is found in Homer's Odyssey when Homer discusses Nausicaa's playing ball, driving a chariot, and swimming in the river. Vase paintings as early as 700-675 B.C. depict women driving chariots. Most of the evidence found in the archaic and classical periods come from literary works and artifacts. The classical period produced historical descriptions, dramas, and poems from the likes of Sappho, Herodotus, Euripides, Aristophanes, Xenophon, Plato, and Aristotle. These works depict women involved in activities

such as juggling, acrobatics, hunting, chariot driving, wrestling, and running.¹

During the Hellenistic and Roman periods literary sources included both Greek and Roman poets and historians such as Cicero, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Diodorus Siculus, Propertius, Plutarch, Pausanias, and Athenaeus. These works depict women involved in activities such as swimming, chariot driving, wrestling, and foot races.²

Ball Games

Homer's Odyssey is the first account of women playing ball games and some five hundred years later Xenophon illustrates women involved in juggling. The Phaeacian princess Nausicaa, in Homer's Odyssey,³ is playing a ball game some considered to be Ourania⁴ or skyball. Ourania is basically a game of toss and catch, and was enjoyed by

¹ George Eisen, "Sports and Women in Antiquity" (M.S. Thesis, University of Massachusetts, 1976), 255-256.

² (Eisen 1976, 256)

³ Homer, Odyssey, Book VI., 97-98.

⁴ Casvikis believes that the ball game depicted in Homer's Odyssey is the game Ourania. Casvikis relies on the evidence of Eustathius, Bishop of Thessalonica, for this conclusion. Gardiner also agrees with this conclusion.

Casvikis, "Observations sur l'éducation physique, les sports et les danses de la femme dans la Grèce Antique," Proceedings of the International Seminar for the History of Physical Education and Sports (Vienna, Austria: 1974); Eustathius, Commentarii ad Homeri Odysseam, 2 vols. ed. J.G. Stallbaum, (Leipzig: G. Weigel, 1925-26); Norman Gardiner, Athletics of the Ancient World (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), 230.

princess Nausicaa to pass the time as she waited for her laundered clothing to dry.

Aporrhaxis is a ball game in which a participant bounces the ball on the ground with great force in order for the ball to rebound back into the air and counting the bounces.⁵ The earliest account of Aporrhaxis is on a red figured hydria which depicts a girl with a large ball.

Ephedrismos is a ball game in which the participant throws a stone in order to knock over another stone. Ephedrismos was originally thought to be played exclusively by men, but there is some evidence to indicate women also played the game.⁶

Passe-Boule⁷ is a game of catch in which a ball is thrown back and forth through a loop in the center. There are only two surviving artifacts depicting the game Passe-Boule; one represents two boys playing and one represents two girls playing.

Greek literature gives little evidence that Greek women were active in the physical activity of juggling. Most of

⁵ Evidence for Aporrhaxis is found in: Julius Pollux, Naucratis, (Leipzig, GDR: R.G. Tevneri, 1900-37), IX 103 ff.; Norman Gardiner, Greek Athletic Sports and Festivals (London: Macmillan Co., 1910), 485.

⁶ (Casvikis 1974, 8); Denise Palmer, "Sports and Games in the Art of Early Civilization" (M.S. Thesis, University of Alberta, 1967); Gardiner, Athletics of the Ancient World, 231.

⁷ Helene McClees, The Daily Life of the Greeks and Romans (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1924), 42-43; (Palmer 1967, 244).

the evidence comes from artifacts; the earliest known artifact is on an Attic cup dated around 475-450 B.C. Xenophon's girl acrobat in the Symposium is juggling twelve hoops which indicates that women were not only active in juggling but proficient.

Acrobatics

The earliest known account of feminine acrobatic performance is found in Xenophon's Symposium.⁸ Xenophon illustrates young maidens doing somersaults. The young maidens are considered to be professional performers which may imply that acrobatics was only a professional pasttime. Normally the performers performed in the nude, and the activity was primarily to entertain patrons during dinner. Performing various hand stands was also a common style of acrobatic entertainment performed by women.⁹

Aquatic Activities

In a country surrounded by the sea, aquatic activities were not only recreational but a necessity of everyday life.¹⁰ Swimming was a popular activity for women in

⁸ Xenophon, Symposium, 2:7-14.

⁹ Other evidence for somersaults and hand stands performed as professional entertainment can be found in: (Palmer 1967, 157-158); Palmer 1967, PL. 83, figure 3,4; Athenaeus, The Deipnosophistae, XV 668; Thomas Woody, "The Fair Sex in Greek Society," Research Quarterly, 9 (1939): 66.

¹⁰ (Eisen 1976, 214)

ancient Greece. The earliest known evidence of women involved in swimming is Homer's Odyssey. Nausicaa and her attendants bathed and played in the river, but it does not specifically say that they were involved in the act of swimming.¹¹ The only known artifact depicting women in the act of swimming is a red figured vase that shows a group of women swimming that is dated around 500 B.C. Pausanias tells of Scyllis and his daughter Hydna who dove off ships and swam in the sea, and Herodotus also makes reference to Scyllis and Hydna's ability to swim long distances.¹²

Hunting

Xenophon was the first Greek to write to any great extent on hunting, and suggested that both men and women should take part in it. Lycurgus, at Sparta, ruled that hunting by both men and women was good for the state. Most accounts of women involved in hunting are found in mythological Greek writings. In Euripides' Hippolytus¹³ Phaedra was passionately devoted to the hunt, Xenophon¹⁴ talks about how women love to hunt, and the Roman poet

¹¹ Homer, Odyssey, 89.

¹² Pausanias, The Description of Greece, X xix 1; Herodotus, The History, Bk. VIII 8.

¹³ Euripides, Hippolytus, trans. A.T. Murray (Stanford University Press, 1931), 215-222.

¹⁴ Xenophon, Scripta Minora, XIII 18.

Propertius¹⁵ of the first century B.C. sings about the beautiful and vital Spartan maidens hunting.

Equestrian Sports

Once again the first account of women involved in driving chariots is Homer's Odyssey.¹⁶ Nausicaa had driven a mule cart down to the river where she played ball games and swam while doing her laundry. Vases dating back to 700-675 B.C. depict women driving light chariots in a procession.¹⁷ An Attic vase dating around 550 B.C. also depicts a woman charioteer. Women's main involvement in chariot racing in the classical period was one of ownership. Many women owned chariots and teams of horses that men would race for them in athletic games.¹⁸

The first woman recorded to win an Olympic victory was Cynisca, sister of Agesilaus of the Spartan royal house.¹⁹ A statue was placed in her honor in the Altis of Olympia, and the base of that statue has survived giving credit to

¹⁵ Donald Sobol, The Amazons of Greek Mythology (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1972), 124.

¹⁶ Homer, Odyssey, VI, 96-104.

¹⁷ Pierre Devambez, Greek Painting (New York: Viking Press, 1962), Pl. 47.

¹⁸ H.A. Harris, Sport in Greece and Rome (New York: Cornell University Press, 1972), 177-178; -----, Greek Athletes and Athletics (London: Hutchinson, 1964), 180; Pausanias, Description of Greece, V 16:1.

¹⁹ Xenophon, Scripta Minora, IX.

Xenophon's account. Xenophon's account has also been confirmed by Plutarch and Pausanias.²⁰ Euryleonis, another Spartan woman, won an Olympic victory in the two-horse chariot race shortly after Cynisca's victory.²¹ A century later Belistiche, an Argive, won the colt's four-horse chariot race at Olympia.²² Women also won many chariot races at the Panatheneia, and inscriptions at Delphi record that Hermesianax, daughter's had won chariot races at the Isthmian games.²³

There is some evidence for women being involved in horseback riding during Greek antiquity. Xenophon's The Art of Horsemanship illustrates that riding on horseback was an acceptable practice by both men and women.²⁴ An Attic vase, found in Daphnae, dating around 550 B.C. depicts a nude girl riding on horse back. An Ionic work of the fifth century B.C. depicts a woman riding side-saddle, and Phaedra the passionate huntress often hunted on horse back.

Wrestling

Although wrestling was the most popular sport in Greece

²⁰ Plutarch, Agesilaus, trans. B. Perrin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), XX; Pausanias, The Description of Greece, III 8:1.

²¹ Ibid., III 17:6.

²² Ibid., V 8:11; Athenaeus, The Deipnosophistae, XIII, 596e.

²³ (Eisen 1976, 229)

²⁴ Xenophon, The Art of Horsemanship, 13-68.

it was not widespread among women. In fact wrestling for women never spread much further than the city of Sparta. Wrestling for women was introduced by Lycurgus in the ninth century B.C.²⁵ Xenophon, Plutarch, and Euripides give examples of how Lycurgus instituted wrestling for women in Sparta.²⁶

Women did not wrestle other women exclusively. It was not uncommon for maidens of Sparta to wrestle boys.²⁷ Women's wrestling obtained Olympic status at Daphne from 41 A.D. (reign of Roman Emperor Justinus) to 521 A.D. (reign of Byzantine Emperor Justinus). Malalas, in the sixth century A.D., includes in his history of the Olympic Games of Daphne the participation of Syrian girls in the wrestling events, and the victors received material benefits and were honored with priestly functions.²⁸

Running

Running was the most popular physical activity for women in ancient Greece. Greek women's involvement in

²⁵ (Eisen 1976, 236)

²⁶ Xenophon, The Lacedaemonians, I 4; Plutarch, Lycurgus, XIV; Euripides, Andromache, trans. J.F. Nims, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 96.

²⁷ Ibid.; (Sobol 1972, 96); Cicero, Tusculan Disputations, trans. J.D. King (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), II xv 36; Athenaeus, The Deipnosophistae, XIII 566e; Ovid, Heroides, 16.149; L. Meyer, "Concerning Gymnastic Exercises for Girls Among the Ancients," Clausthal, 1872.

²⁸ (Eisen 1976, 239)

running is based on religious cultic rituals and centers around agricultural customs.²⁹ The connection between running and fertility is apparent from the fact that the altar of Demeter, a fertility goddess, stood near the stadium at Olympia.³⁰

There is evidence in both Greek mythology³¹ and art³² for women's involvement in running, but the greatest amount of evidence comes from writings about the women of Sparta.³³ Lycurgus established running contests for Spartan women which were intended to perfect Spartan women for the benefit of the state, so that they would be good mothers and citizens.³⁴ Spartan physical education for women even influenced the ideas of Plato. In Plato's

²⁹ (Eisen 1976, 240); Pausanias, The Description of Greece, XIII 7; (Meyer 1872, 5-7).

³⁰ Erwin Mehl, "Die Mutterrechtlichen Heraein als Vorlauffer und Grundlage der Vaterrechtlichen Olympischen Spiele". Proceedings of the International Seminar for the History of Physical Education and Sports Wein, Austria: 1974, 5; Jozsef Keresztesyi, Az Olimpiak Toertenetek Budapest: Gondolat Kiado, 1972, 30-31.

³¹ Andre Bonnard, Greek Civilization. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1957, 13; Martin Nilsson, A History of Greek Religion. trans. by F.J. Fielden. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949, 28; Jane Harrison, Themis (New York: University Books, 1962), 229-235.

³² (Eisen 1976, 245-249); James Kyle, "The Maidens' Race on Attic Vases," American Journal of Archeology, 6(1902):53; Sappho, Fragments 73, in Harris, Greek Athletes and Athletics, 182.

³³ Xenophon, The Lacedaemonians, I 4; Theocritus, The Idylls, trans. C.S. Calvery (London: George Bell and Sons, 1892), XVIII; Plutarch, Lycurgus, XIV 2; (Meyer 1872, 1); Cicero, Tusculans, 2.15.

³⁴ Xenophon, Lac. res., 1.4; Plutarch, Lycurgus, 14; (Meyer 1872, 6).

Republic he contends that there is no distinction among the animals as to their nature, therefore no distinction should be made between men and women. Plato suggested that Athenian women should be introduced to training similar to the Spartan women's regimen of physical activity. Plato suggested the stade (200 yds.), diaulos (400 yds.), dolichos (800 yds.), and the ephippios (half mile) for a running program.³⁵

There is an inscription at Delphi that gives more evidence of women's involvement in running. The inscription indicates that in the middle of the first century A.D. there were festivals for men as well as women in which running was the main physical activity.³⁶ The earliest account of women in running competitions is the athletic meetings at Olympia. Although women were banned from participating in the Olympic games (in a general sense) they had their own athletic events surrounding the Olympic games. The Heraea was a foot race for girls of all ages that was begun by Hippodameia out of gratitude to Hera for her marriage to Pelops. The Heraea was run in the Olympic stadium, and the winners had the right to erect statues just like the men.³⁷

³⁵ (Eisen 1976, 244); Plato, Republic, p. 452 ff.; (Meyer 1872, 4).

³⁶ (Harris 1964, 180); Pomtow, "Neue Delfische Inschriften," 71-77.

³⁷ Pausanias, The Description of Greece, VI xx 9, V xvi 1; Thomas Scanlon, "The Footrace of the Heraia at Olympia," Ancient World 9 (1984): 77-90.

Summary

The most quoted evidence for women not being involved in physical activity³⁰ is found in book six of Pausanias' The Description of Greece written in the second century A.D. The Elean law of throwing any women of the cliff of Mount Tropaion that has sneaked into the Olympic games is discussed. Kallipateira had trained her son Peisirodos and disguised herself to watch him compete, but was discovered when she jubilantly ran to congratulate her son on his victory and in the process tore her robe from her body; exposing her womanly appearance. This passage is of importance because women did have a keen interest in the Olympics, and at times tried to participate in any capacity. It is also important because the Elean law only forbids "women" from being present not "girls", but the account of Kallipateira is not unique for women's involvement in the Olympic games. In the 129th Olympics Belistich, a woman from the Macedonian seacoast, won the synosis for colts. The priestess of Demeter Chamyne was seated in a place of honor at the Olympic games, and this honor was granted by the Eleans.

It is apparent that women were not only involved in the Olympics to a small degree, but involved in physical activity to a great extent in Greek antiquity. It is

³⁰ This example is more specific to women's involvement in the Olympics, but is often assumed (incorrectly) to mean women's involvement in physical activity in general.

incorrect to assume women in Greek antiquity were not involved in physical activity based on a few isolated accounts. It is clear from the evidence presented in this paper that there is far more evidence to indicate women's involvement in physical activity in Greek antiquity than evidence to indicate they were not involved in physical activity.